

SERMON- Advent 2 (B)
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Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
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Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

OPENING:

When I was a child and I was bored at church, I would thumb through the Bible, looking for something/ anything to grab my attention.

I remember flipping through to the very last page, to the very last book, to Revelation, to find that at the very end of the Bible, the final word, fittingly, is "AMEN."

I remember flipping to the start, to Genesis, and to find there that the very *first* word was, equally fittingly, "IN THE BEGINNING."

(3 words in English, but ONE in Hebrew and in Greek)

In our reading, we get that word again "IN THE BEGINNING" in Chapter One, Verse One, of the Gospel of Mark.

So, "IN THE BEGINNING" starts the Old Testament and "IN THE BEGINNING" starts the first Gospel to be written in the New Testament.

Why does Mark begin that way? Why start the way that Genesis did?

Mark is connecting the dots between the two, because he wants to get the reader's attention concerning this new moment in creation. At this hinge point of history, God is starting something new but also recalling something from the beginning.

So Mark is writing about Galilee, and we are in Jesus' time.

But we are also back in Genesis and in the time of Eden.

This was intentional, because Mark is writing about how God has turned the world upside down... again... through his powers of creation.

The image on the front of your bulletin helps with this idea, the quotation there is from Isaiah, and Mark cites it.

God will lay mountains low, valleys will be raised up, and a world will be turned upside down.

A modern example of this comes from the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean- At World's End*, where Captain Jack Sparrow's ship is stuck in the underworld, in Davey Jones' locker. They figure out, though that, in order to get out of that situation, they have to risk death, in order to achieve life. They have to rock the boat, literally, from side to side, and they end up... right side up in a new life.¹

¹ [Pirates of the Caribbean - At World's End - Up Is Down Scene - YouTube](#)

A cool scene, this is all done through the magic of cinema...

How do we do *that*?

How do we achieve such a shift in our perception, such a bending in our reality?

Can we return to Eden? Experience resurrection in our life?

How might we prepare for such a life-altering earthquake during this Advent season?

Well, first we read the Gospel of Mark.

MARK:

Now those of you who have been coming to the Adult Forums at the 9 AM hour have been kind enough to indulge your rector in two hours of a stream-of-consciousness lovefest about the Gospel of Mark. Thank you for that.

You have a whole year with this Gospel in front of you, so get used to this sort of thing.

For our purposes today, it's important simply to know that Mark's Gospel begins abruptly here with this passage. There is no birth story, no background, no buildup. And then it ends just as abruptly only 16 chapters later. Jesus dies, is buried and then... fade to black. There is no depiction of the Resurrection, No Ascension, no appearances, no Jesus coming back and saying everything is going to be okay. There is just an empty tomb, and a seeming tragedy.

I am bringing up this today because, with Mark, when we think we are at the start, we are actually midway through the movie, and.....

when we think we get to the end, we will see that we end up going back to the beginning.

Confused? It's a little disorienting. And I could tell you about how Jesus is supposed to be the new Adam. And John the Baptist

But instead I'd like to share a story of **me** reading the Gospel of Mark as evidence of how the Gospel was able to turn **my** life upside down, so it was actually right side up.

To tell that story, it's important to share, again for many of you, a difficult portion of my life story. Where everything went black for me and I was in the underworld for a while. My twin brother, Leonard, was killed in the Iraq War in 2004. I was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I never lost my faith, but the tomb for me, sometimes, felt empty, barren, purposeless.

Fast forward 10+ years, I was in the basement of the seminary library, reading that week's assignment which just so happened to be the end of the Gospel of Mark and Michelle and I were pregnant with our child, Mark.

I am reading the final chapter, the last page, and like any book, you can see how many pages are left and you figure the author needs to wrap things up and fast. But Mark instead ends this story where the whole thing seems to just fall off a cliff. Jesus is dead, but nothing seems to have happened. The female disciples head to the tomb and they meet an angel who just seems to scare them into silence. A comparable ending in artistic history is when Star Wars the Empire Strikes Back ends with Han Solo frozen in Carbonite and the Jedis on the run. It takes considerable courage and artistic mastery to leave your audience like that.

Then I reread the Gospel of Mark and you then the angel saying something like this: "Mary and Mary, it's not over, go back, go back to the beginning to Galilee, start this story again. Go back to the beginning, this is not end, this is the beginning." You realize, that amidst all this pain and tragedy, that Mark has left the finishing of the story up to us.

As I was reading the ending of the Gospel of Mark there in that seminary library I felt the Holy Spirit, I felt like my brother Leonard was there at the end of the very last page of the book. That **he** said to me what the angel said to the female disciples, "Charles go back to the start, give your son the gift of going on that journey, of experiencing life, of walking with Jesus.

Don't put him in the tomb here with me."

Mark the Evangelist has the courage to not fill in the final lines of the story, because their ours to fill instead. He points us back to the beginning and to how God create something out of nothing, life out of death.

In our passage, Mark says that his Gospel is just the beginning. Mark does not give everything that happened to Jesus, he races through his life. He doesn't supply an ending, because the ending can only be resolved "through only our own discipleship. That is, whether the risen Jesus who continues the journey is actually 'seen' or not depends on whether or not we ourselves follow him."²

Life continues through the journey that God has to offer us through beginning again, through new creation.

We are told to go back not only to Galilee, but to Genesis and the marvelous things accomplished by God. Life begins again and we will return to the cosmos created

² Ched Myers. 2018. *Binding the Strong Man- A Political Reading of Mark's Study of Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 108.

by God. We will be reoriented through liberation and an Exodus that will mean rebirth.

That's a lot to offer here on a Sunday morning, it's a lot to offer to a newborn son. That's one of the reasons we named Mark "Mark".

He has to deal with all that pathology and projection and trauma from his genesis/origin story.

But we all do though: that's called discipleship. That's called being the church. That's called being willing to start in the wilderness with John the Baptist and Jesus and go on this journey that will end with the emptiest of tombs, but the promise of a Risen Christ, and the reminder to begin again, to read the Gospel again, and retrace the footsteps of the one you or other followed in the first place.

Again, a lot to deal with here on a Sunday morning.

The Gospel of Mark is not for the faint of heart.

CONCLUSION:

There's a story of a student who had memorized the whole of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience. After careful study, he was ready to give the performance, especially the ending. At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. Upon reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text. So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence. "The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious," said [his teacher] "and as people exited the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the nonending."

So what are we to make of this, this non-ending?

The key is the first verse in Mark's Gospel. "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

With Jesus, the good news began, the kingdom of God is at hand, and it hasn't ended, it's just beginning.³

AMEN

³ Long, Tom. 4/4/2006. "Middle East Peace: Mark 16:1-8" *The Christian Century*.
[Middle East peace: Mark 16:1-8 | The Christian Century](#)